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Understanding ethnography through a lifecourse framework: a research journey into alternative spiritual spaces

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Recently scholars have emphasised the importance of looking at the researcher's experience and how positionality, emotions and embodiment shape the ethnographic fieldwork process. Specifically, feminist contributions have shown how the professional and the personal can be interlinked when conducting ethnographic research and have reconsidered the role of the researcher in the production of knowledge. However, such accounts often lack analytical engagements and/or reveal little about the researcher's experience beyond the fieldwork. By adopting a lifecourse framework and its conceptual categories of *social pathways*, *turning points*, *transitions* & *trajectories*, this paper offers an analytical device to read through the ethnographer's own experience. The paper explores a research journey undertaken in the intentional spiritual communities of Damanhur (Italy) and Terra Mirim (Brazil) by the author, which aimed to study the enactment of alternative spaces. By integrating a lifecourse framework, this paper firstly argues the need to consider how *social pathways* shape the lifecourse positioning and the research trajectory. Secondly, it shows how *turning points* can affect both the research direction but also the researcher's lifecourse. Thirdly, the paper argues that the fieldwork is only one of the *transitional phases* of ethnographic research and encourages the researcher to reflect on its long-term effects. It concludes by discussing how such experience can impact on the lifecourse of the researcher as well as on the research participants.

Key words: Ethnography, Lifecourse, Emotions, Turning Points, Research Transitions, Spiritual Communities

The Lifecourse Framework

During the last decades, the lifecourse paradigm has been used across disciplines within the social sciences in variegated ways. Some of them were mainly focused on understanding human development through studying life transitions (i.e. childhood, adulthood, motherhood), other scholars aimed to investigate how social institutions influence people's life choices and others how historical social changes shape individuals' life trajectories (Elder *et al.* 2003). Geographers, on the other hand, have become mainly concerned "in examining

the significance of place in the unfolding of life transitions” (Hörschelmann 2011, 378). Recently there is an increasing interest in how, besides birth, death and migration, other life events can act as turning points in people’s lifecourse (Bailey 2009), and in how such events can be the result of the interconnection between multiple lifecourses (Elder *et al.* 2003). Drawing upon a more relational understanding, the recent focus is indeed on the principle of ‘linked lives’ for which one’s lifecourse is shaped also by other individuals’ lifecourse and social networks (Elder *et al.* 2003; Bailey 2009; Hörschelmann 2011; Jarvis *et al.* 2011).

Generally, researchers give attention to the lifecourse of research participants, leaving little space for conceptualising their own lifecourse and how it is affected by other people encountered in the field. Exceptionally, Wimark (2016) uses a lifecourse positioning to analyse how *känsloläge* (individual’s emotional positioning) and *känsloupplivelse* (individual’s experiences that shape lifecourse trajectories) affect the research process and the lifecourse of the researcher. Besides this exception, lifecourse scholars have paid little attention on the different phases and transitions of the ethnographic process and how this shapes the lifecourse of the researcher. Thus, the aim of this paper is to use a lifecourse framework in order to better understand the ethnographic process and its impact on the lifecourse of the researcher. Elder *et al.* (2003) have acknowledged several useful concepts – *social pathways, turning points, transitions & trajectories* – that have been developed within the lifecourse paradigm, which I argue are useful concepts to investigate the entanglements between ethnographic research and the researcher’s lifecourse. I argue that such a framework highlights the long-term effects of the ethnographic process on the lifecourse of the researcher and contributes to existing feminist debates (Moss 2001, Sharp 2005, Longhurst and Johnston 2014) by reducing the gap between the personal and professional, and between the researcher and the research(ed).

For the purpose of this article, I draw on ethnographic research that aimed to investigate the enactment of alternative spaces such as intentional communities. Intentional communities are defined as a group of people “who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose” (Sargent 1994, 14-15). My ethnographic research was carried out in the intentional communities of Damanhur (Dh) in Italy and Terra Mirim (TM) in Brazil over 2012 and 2013. This paper will firstly analyse how feminist scholars have contributed to the debates on ethnography by reconsidering the role of the researcher in the production of knowledge; thus, by addressing the analytical limits of feminist contributions, it will organise the analysis in three sections by reflecting on social

pathways, turning points and transitional phases. These sections show how the researcher's positionality and experiences can influence and change the research direction and the lifecourse of the researcher and finally, argue that the timescale of ethnographic investigations should be expanded beyond the transitional fieldwork phase.

Ethnographic Research(er)

The conceptualisation of ethnography research and the role of the ethnographer have significantly changed in the last decades (Crang and Cook 2007). In earlier times, the ethnographer was supposed to be a neutral, impersonal – a “dehumanised machine” whose experience was not relevant for the scientific production (Okely 1992, 3). However, since the 1960s, some anthropologist ethnographers, mainly women, started to share their personal fieldwork experiences in separate –often anonymised– auto-biographical accounts (*ibid*). Disenchanted with positivism, feminist ethnographers began to reject the idea of a distant and detached observer and argued in favour of a reflexive approach that recognises and reflects on the role of the researcher in the production of knowledge (Callaway 1992). This coincided with the rise of radical theories that started challenging the separations between professional/personal, public/private and outsider/insider (Stacey 1988, Okely and Callaway 1992, Marshall 2002). Since then, I argue that feminist approaches have influenced ethnographic accounts and reconsidered the role of the research(er) in, at least, four relevant ways.

Firstly, feminist and postmodern approaches recognise the incomplete nature of ethnographic representations and thus, consider knowledge as partial, positioned, situated, contingent and interpretative (McDowell 1992, Wheatley 1994, Cope 2002). By rejecting universal, objectives and realist ethnographic accounts, a feminist sensibility aims to reveal the power relations embedded in the field and “calls for knowers to take responsibility for what they claim to know with respect to their positions” (Falconer-Al-Hindi and Kawabata 2002, 106). Though acknowledging the importance of positionality and reflexivity, feminist scholars, such as Stacey (1988), Rose (1997) Peake (2015), reveal how such processes are not absent of contradictions, fallibilities and limits.

A second and interconnected point, is that feminist scholars expose the “indubitable messiness, complexity and ambiguity” of the ethnographic research process (Wheatley 1994,

431). Within anthropology, DeVita's (1992) contributions reveal the eventfulness, non-linearity and personal side of doing fieldwork. This messiness and complexity has increasingly been recognised within feminist human geography (Sharp 2005); for some scholars this depends on the fluid, dynamic and unpredictable nature of fieldwork (Cook 2001, Billo and Hiemestra, 2013); for others this is strictly linked to the emotional landscape (Hardy 2008, Humble 2012, Fitzpatrick and Longley 2014).

Thirdly, feminist scholars have highlighted that the research process is shaped by the emotional entanglements experienced in the field (Widdowfield 2000, Bondi 2005, Bennett 2009, Evans 2012) and, more specifically, in ethnographic investigations (Bennett 2004, Hardy 2008, Humble 2012, Briggs 2013 and Laliberté and Schurr 2015). Hardy (2008), for example, has shown that in order to understand the unplanned divergent outcomes of her comparative ethnography, it is necessary to explore the emotional landscape in which the two organisations investigated were embedded.

Fourthly, feminist geographers argue that the researcher cannot dismiss the body, other bodies as well as the researcher's body (Moss and Dyck 2003, Sharp 2005, Longhurst *et al.* 2008, Billo and Hiemestra 2013, Longhurst and Johnston 2014, Lloyd and Hopkins 2015). Longhurst and Johnston (2014), recognising a research gap, encourage researchers to reflect on the embodied nature of fieldwork and methodologies. Similarly, in ethnography "the body becomes the point of access" to knowing the world (Halstead 2008, 7).

These approaches adopted by feminist scholars have encouraged ethnographers to reflect on their own positionality, flexibility, emotions, embodiment and ultimately to engage in a process of critical self-reflection. According to Gobo (2008, 62), this postmodern style is called autoethnography where rather than "understanding the *other* [original emphasis] more fully, what field workers should do is gain a fuller understanding of themselves." There are different possible ways to develop an autoethnographic approach, yet the general aim is to reduce the distance between the researcher and the research by considering the ethnographer not only as "agent of signification" but also as an "object of signification" (Butz and Besio 2009, 1671). The researcher's experience thus needs to be incorporated into the data and it becomes instrumental within the research output (Anderson 2006).

The emergence of autoethnography was strongly influenced by the development of autobiography. Autobiography is considered a literary genre, mainly launched by feminist

scholars in the 1980s to offer insights into women's lives and to provide a more experienced understanding of social injustices (Moss 2001). Autobiography became popular initially within anthropology and later geography. In Moss' (2001) edited book, autobiographic accounts have helped firstly, to highlight the entanglement between personal matters and career development (Archer 2001, Monk 2001); secondly, to understand why researcher were encouraged in specific research directions (Knopp 2001, Saltmarsh 2001); and thirdly, to disclose the complexities of the fieldwork and the analytical process (Buts 2001, Cook 2001). Yet, autobiography and, more specifically autoethnography, though they gained more popularity remain in a sort of grey area, often dismissed for its descriptive nature. Moss (2001, 19) suggests that the inclusion of the personal lives should not be only substantive but also analytical and encourages "pushing the analytic borders of autobiography".

In the remainder of this paper I want to push further such analytical boundaries of (auto)ethnography by using the lifecourse framework. Even though ethnography and lifecourse share an interest on the autobiographic genre and embrace a feminist sensibility, they have not been interlinked to conceptualise the researcher's experience. Monk (2001) in her autobiographical accounts did adopt a lifecourse framework but mainly for analysing *other* women's lives according to their life transitions. I argue that exploring the ethnographic process through the lifecourse categories of *social pathways*, *turning points* and *transitions & trajectories* provides an advanced analytical perspective useful to understand the reciprocal influence between the ethnographic journey and the lifecourse of the researcher. Moreover, these analytical categories of the lifecourse framework open up new discussions on extended timescale often missed in ethnographic accounts.

Social Pathways

Drawing upon the concept of *social pathways* from the lifecourse framework, an ethnographic account should take into consideration the social and cultural background and institutional context that have affected the positionality of the researcher (Elder *et al* 2003). For instance, Wimark (2016) explains how his feeling position (*känsloläge*) that is developed in the lifecourse affects the research process. Thinking about one's own socio-spatially constructed identities, acknowledging the cultural background, conceptualising one's own subjectivity and reflecting on the positionality are fundamental steps for undertaking an ethnographic project (Herbert 2000, Crang and Cook 2007).

I could be identified as a middle-class white woman in her early 30s, who grew up in a marginal geographical Italian context (a small town in Sardinia) with a rich Western educational background and who has adopted a postcolonial religion – Buddhism in a Catholic context (Fois and Sesto 2012). On finishing my first MA in economics and management, I undertook a research project for 6 months in Argentina to investigate the economic crisis of 2001. Yet these experiences generated feelings of disappointment and dissatisfaction with neoliberal capitalist ontologies – taught in business schools and unsuccessfully applied in Argentina – and triggered off the desire to focus on how alternative grassroots groups challenge dominant mainstream ontologies.

As Cloke (2004, 1) observes our research choices are influenced not only by the “persuasiveness of the study” but also by our “subjectivities, identities, positionalities and situated knowledges”. These “personal politics” are considered “the prompts for our individual practice of human geography” (Cloke *et al.* 2004, 365). In my case, they prompt the desire to give voice to those self-excluded groups who have chosen an alternative lifestyle to show how ‘other’ socio-economic worlds are enacted. In the lifecourse framework these ‘personal politics’ emerge from the social pathways in which the individual is embedded. Adopting a lifecourse framework for reflecting on the ethnographer’s positionality enables the researcher to overcome some of the limits identified by Rose (1997) and Nagar *et al.* (2007) where often the researcher’s positionality is explained independently from the institutional context in which it is situated. However, by drawing upon such a framework which stresses the importance of *social pathways*, the researcher is encouraged to reflect on how his/her identity intersects with the institutional, social and cultural context.

Turning points

The concept of *turning point* used within the lifecourse framework and understood as a substantial change in the direction of one’s life (Elder *et al.* 2003), can illustrate the unpredictability of the ethnographic research. For instance, Hörschelmann (2011) emphasises the necessity of capturing the complexity and non-linearity of life transitions. In the context of my research, the lack of response from communities with a strong economic focus compared to the positive replies from spiritual communities functioned as a substantive change to the direction of my research. However, such turning points not only affected the research design but also challenged my positioning as a researcher. A general feeling of scepticism, suspicion and mistrust prevailed towards those alternative spiritualities that do not

follow a specific institutional tradition such as New Age (Dh) and Shamanism (TM). Although my research aimed to challenge common stereotypes around the idea of intentional communities, I realised I had my own cultural preconceptions before entering the field. By exploring my emotional and rational resistance, it emerged how my lifecourse positioning, shaped by my own social pathways, kept me from accepting immediately the change of the research trajectory and thus from entering the field. However, as Billo and Hiemstra (2013) underline, it is essential to adjust to the scenario that is encountered. Nevertheless, the ethnographic scenario is constantly changing and turning points can occur *vis-à-vis* field encounters and events.

Reflecting back on the fieldwork experience, flexibility was essential especially when considering the new research trajectory of investigating spiritual spaces. Similar to what was emphasised by Hardy (2012, 119), “unplanned divergent methodological outcomes resulted in conducting ethnographic fieldwork” with the two intentional communities of Dh and TM. During my time in TM I felt that the research methods selected and previously used in Dh – in-depth interviews, participant observation, internal documents collection – were limited in understanding the enactment of this alternative space. This became clear during my interviews with community residents:

For me shamanism is not a theory, it is not something that you can learn in the books. ... Shamanism is about feeling. (Mikania, woman, TM)

Rituals... Rituals made me understand what TM is. You cannot understand TM if you don't do the rituals, you will understand very superficially. (Ixora, woman, TM)

Through Mikania and Ixora's words, I acknowledged the limits of my methodological approach. I felt to be in a 'research impasse', in which if I wanted to go further in gathering data, I had to explore other possible ways. In other words, I had to decide if I wanted to participate in the shamanic rituals, such as the Ayahuasca ceremony. This ritual consisted in drinking a hallucinogenic brew from Amazonia which alters the state of consciousness (Callaway *et al.* 1999; Beyer 2012; Fotiou 2012). The journey affects different dimensions – physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual – of the human being. Several questions occupied my mind, some of them were: “Do you have enough data? Are you ready to undertake a spiritual journey inside yourself? What about if your body cannot hold it? You know you don't have to... but why not?”. While other anthropological studies intended to

investigate Shamanism itself (Castaneda 1968), my research aim was not even to investigate spiritual communities, but rather the enactment of alternative spaces. The ‘research impasse’ was eased when, despite my cultural scepticism and fears, I took this further step by engaging in the shamanic rituals mainly because I thought I could not understand these spaces otherwise.

Whilst classic ethnographers such as Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) pointed out the importance of not losing oneself during the immersive ethnographic process, my ethnographic experience required me, instead, to ‘surrender’ to the field dynamics if I wanted to reply to my research aims. Explaining how his research changed direction, Clifton (1992) underlines how in investigating the hidden sorcery of one Potawatomy Indian community he was affected by some inexplicable shamanic tricks. Such (shamanic) experiences could lead to an epistemological crisis, positively understood by Halstead (2008) as transformative space where the ethnographic knowledge is constructed. Yet, it is important to understand how such experiences affect not only the production of knowledge and the research trajectory but also the lifecourse of the researcher. As Delyser and Starrs claim (2000, viii) “fieldwork, rather than just providing straightforward answers, raises more and ever-richer questions”. By using a lifecourse framework, this section has not only emphasised how turning points can constantly change the direction of the research design but also the extent to which such turning points are interlinked with the lifecourse of the researcher.

Beyond the transitional phase

Ethnographic fieldwork can be considered one of the *transitional phases* of the research process and it is often the phase that receives more attention. Though ethnographic accounts underline the complexity of the analytical phase and the challenges of the writing-up stage (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983; Gobo 2008), the researcher is often considered as a rational subject able to make easily sense of the data. However, when back from my fieldwork, I perceived the significant amount of data collected as messiness rather than as richness. Cook (1998) discusses how the ‘messiness’ encountered in the research process is rarely found in written accounts. Her paper focuses on the analytical process and how the possible multiple outcomes of the research can leave the researcher confused. The data are described in this case as ‘trees’ with multiple possible branches to explore.

During the analytical phase, I started to analyse the interviews, field diary and internal documents yet excluded the data collected in the shamanic rituals. I was still trying to make sense of such spiritual experiences at a personal level that the idea of including them in my account felt too much. My research was crossing into my life to the extent that in order to understand my data I felt I needed first to understand myself. It was then, in the middle of this ‘analytical impasse’, that I decided to go to a transpersonal psychologist. I needed to speak with someone that was unrelated to me and could help to try to answer my existential questions raised in the fieldwork. I felt that shamanism opened a window into my life and the world but I could not see through it. Also I could not understand these new insights within my Western frame of references. Not even my Buddhist philosophy could extricate me from my emotional/intellectual mess.

A lifecourse framework can help highlight the different *transitions* of the ethnographic research, how the fieldwork can impact the lifecourse of the researcher and its long-term effects. However, discussions of extended timescale are generally neglected. Emotions, feelings, embodiments and positions are important but often forgotten in the post-fieldwork and analytical phase. One possible factor of such oversight can be attributed to the increasing temporal regimes of academia and the pressure to produce an output after the collection of the data. This might obscure the dynamics of other phases, such as analysis and writing up, which are crucial to the production of knowledge. Feminist scholars have recently engaged a debate about ‘slow scholarship’ to highlight the high pressure of a corporate academic environment and propose an ethics of care that slows down the neoliberal temporal regimes of academia (Mountz *et al.* 2015). This feminist politics of resistance aims to be more careful of the emotional and mental distress that is often hidden in the academia (Peake 2015), to create time and space for other collaborative forms (Pickerill 2014) and to support sustainable and transformative actions that can positively impact outside the academia (Pain 2014).

Though not intentionally engaging in a slow ‘scholarship’ resistant practice, in order to clarify my analytical mess, I simply needed time: time to let emotions settle, questions to be answered and ideas be developed; time to explore the branches of the tree. At some point I experienced what Cook (1998, 101) calls the ‘punctum point’— that moment that “sparks off new trains of thought, [...] the little detail that, easily overlooked, suddenly becomes the focus of the picture”. For me, though, it was more than a moment: it was a process.

Thus time was essential to think, feel and metabolise the ethnographic experience. Briefly, I first realised that by overlooking the spiritual aspect of the enactment I was overlooking the

purpose of these communities (which seems so obvious now). Secondly, ethnographic research becomes also autoethnography (Anderson 2006; Butz and Besio 2009) where the researcher's experience is used to understand a cultural phenomenon and specifically how these alternative spaces are shaped by spiritual practices. Thirdly, I realised that by participating in the shamanic rituals I had engaged with what I term 'spiritual embodied methods'. Though this is explained elsewhere (see Fois 2015), by using my body "as an ethnographic research tool" (Bain and Nash 2006), my personal life became highly intertwined with the research.

Conclusions

Ethnographies cannot be considered transitional phases unto themselves. By expanding the timescale of these investigations a new scenario can be revealed. This can show how the space investigated can challenge and unsettle the lifecourse of the researcher, but also how such 'transitional' experiences can have future implications on the research subjects. For instance, since 2013 I have been collaboratively organising events with other members of TM across the UK. In 2014 I invited the spiritual leaders to give a talk about their community at Newcastle University which received 60 guests. I realised that my interest in TM was not only limited to my research but rather that the shamanic philosophy was something with which I could deeply relate. My ethnographic fieldwork not only affected my lifecourse but also the lifecourse of the TM community enabling it to expand its global outreach.

As discussed, feminist scholars have influenced the evolution of ethnographic research in several ways. The role of the researcher has been revaluated to the extent that his/her experience, body and emotions are often considered research output. However, such (auto)ethnographies often risk being descriptive accounts lacking analytical strength (Moss 2001, Anderson 2006). In order to provide a more systematic analytical framework, this paper has integrated the key lifecourse categories of *social pathways*, *turning points*, *transitions & trajectories* to read through the ethnographic experience. This stresses the importance of the researcher and his/her cultural, social and institutional background; captures the turning points that affect the research process and how they shape the research[er] lifecourse; and reflects on the ethnographic process beyond the fieldwork transition. The latter point emphasises the importance of the analytical process, which is often dismissed perhaps due to pressures of the neoliberal temporal regimes of academia. By

reflecting on this extended timescale, this paper has also shown how the ethnographic field relations can endure beyond the fieldwork affecting the lifecourse of the researcher and equally the developmental trajectory of the research subjects. Moreover, a “slower” scholarship can open new scenarios in terms of research findings by extending the methodological spectrum of knowledge production and/or addressing research fields which might not have been previously considered. It could also potentially create more sustainable, transformative and healthier changes within and beyond the academia.

Overall, this paper contributes to the lifecourse paradigm (Elder *et al.* 2003, Bailey 2009; Hörschelmann 2011) by taking the researcher’s experience into account and using some key lifecourse categories to analyse the ‘self’ rather than the ‘other’. Moreover, drawing upon feminist influences (Moss 2001, Sharp 2005, Longhurst and Johnston 2014), this paper advances ethnographic debates by using the lifecourse paradigm as an analytical framework to uncover some key aspects and transitions that occur in ethnography research. In sum, by integrating a lifecourse perspective into ethnographic accounts, this paper encourages researchers to reflect on their social pathways, the turning points and also beyond the transitional phase of the fieldwork, to evaluate how the research has influenced their lifecourse and how this has produced an impact on the lifecourse of the research subjects.

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